

## Message

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East Chicago press clips  
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[http://www.nwitimes.com/news/local/lake/old-smelter-north-of-superfund-site-to-be-investigated/article\\_8a759b44-6bb6-5618-bc2b-fb40021673e4.html](http://www.nwitimes.com/news/local/lake/old-smelter-north-of-superfund-site-to-be-investigated/article_8a759b44-6bb6-5618-bc2b-fb40021673e4.html)

Old smelter north of Superfund site to be investigated

- Lauren Cross lauren.cross@nwi.com, 219-933-3206
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EAST CHICAGO — A charter grade school is among the properties slated for soil sampling this spring, as state and federal agencies move north of the USS Lead Superfund site's borders to investigate contamination left by industry, the Indiana Department of Environmental Management confirmed.

East Chicago Urban Enterprise Academy, 1402 E. Chicago Ave., sits half a mile east of the old U.S. Reduction Co. site, a shuttered aluminum and lead smelter at 4610 Kennedy Ave. that first opened in 1912 between McCook and Melville avenues. Indiana Pallet is the current property owner of the old smelter site.

Academy students took to the playground Wednesday on an unusually warm February day. School Principal Veronica Eskew said as the days grow warmer, so do her concerns about the school's proximity to the USS Lead Superfund site and surrounding industry.

"I just want our kids to be safe, and our staff, anybody that comes on our property. This is a step in the right direction. Once we know, we can do something about it," Eskew said.

Eskew said the state health department conducted on-site blood lead testing at the school over a two-day period in November. State health officials said none of the children tested had elevated blood levels above 5 micrograms per deciliter, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control's threshold for action.

However, from 2005 to 2010, children living in the census tract that contains the lead-tainted West Calumet Housing Complex were twice as likely to have an elevated blood lead level than if they lived elsewhere in the city.

Children are particularly at risk when exposed to lead, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Candidate for cleanup?

State and federal environmental officials noted IDEM staff will conduct soil screenings for lead and other metals at the old U.S. Reduction site, near public right-of-ways, residential areas and school properties in the area north of Chicago Avenue and east of the current Indiana Pallet site.

It's unknown how many properties are being targeted. Other schools north of Chicago Avenue and east of the old industrial site also will be tested, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said.

School City of East Chicago Superintendent Paige McNulty was unavailable for comment last week.

"If sampling shows contamination at levels which may raise concerns about public health, IDEM will continue to evaluate the site as a possible candidate for Superfund listing," according to the EPA, the federal arm of IDEM.

The EPA's Superfund program was established in 1980 in response to growing concerns over health and environmental risks posed by hazardous waste sites, according to the EPA. It allows EPA to clean hazardous waste sites and "to force responsible parties to perform cleanups or reimburse the government for cleanups led by EPA."

Since news first broke last summer about dangerously high lead levels in the soil in the West Calumet Housing Complex and two neighborhoods to the east, much of the EPA's focus has been excavating toxic soil for homeowners south of Chicago Avenue in the USS Lead Superfund site.

The 322-acre site was first proposed for the EPA's Superfund National Priorities List in 1992, but it wasn't listed until 2009. It's bordered by East Chicago Avenue to the north, 151st Street to the south, Parrish Avenue to the east and the Indiana Harbor Canal to the west. It includes Carrie Gosh Elementary School, vacated last summer amid worries of lead exposure.

#### The legalities of cleanup

Emails obtained through a public records request show the EPA planned as early as Oct. 31 to test the soil at East Chicago Urban Enterprise Academy.

In the email exchanges, a contractor working with the EPA told the federal agency that testing the site makes "perfect sense" because aerial contamination and contaminated backfill "have no reason to stop at Chicago Avenue."

The EPA's email exchanges show there were concerns about engaging in work outside the legal boundaries of the USS Lead Superfund site. EPA officials requested the contractor track costs separately so as not to bill Atlantic Richfield and DuPont — two industrial companies previously deemed responsible for cleanup south of Chicago Avenue, but that are not the subject of the investigation planned north of the street.

Ultimately, due to funding and scope-of-work concerns, an EPA spokesperson told The Times the agency later decided IDEM would handle the sampling.

The EPA entered into an access agreement Oct. 31 with the charter school property's owner, the East Chicago Urban Enterprise Association, in which Rita Jacque Gillis, executive director, gave EPA permission to collect soil samples, excavate, backfill and restore the property to its pre-excavation condition. Gillis did not respond to a request seeking comment last week.

The department currently is developing a work plan to include soil screening at these sites. No cost estimates were immediately available, IDEM said.

This action is “out of an abundance of caution,” IDEM said.

IDEM staff, however, already have some understanding of the extent of the contamination near U.S. Reduction.

#### Past investigation

That same site was the focus of a 2002 investigation to determine if the area qualified for further investigation as an EPA Superfund site candidate. IDEM staff took 81 surface soil samples in the area to the east and west of the facility. Lead concentrations ranged from as low as 17 parts per million to as high as 6,700 parts per million.

The EPA's residential cleanup standard is 400 ppm. The agency's “time-critical removal action level” is 1,200 ppm. In West Calumet, the highest concentrations found were at 91,100 ppm.

In a 2004 letter to the EPA, IDEM did not recommend further action at the U.S. Reduction site, and instead deferred all future investigations and cleanup of residential properties to the EPA's Superfund program, citing U.S. EPA's handling of the USS Lead facility approximately 1 mile south.

IDEM at the time also concluded that the contaminant levels encountered were “inconclusive as to whether or not the U.S. Reduction Co. is a potential responsible party” regarding contaminated nearby properties.

An IDEM spokesman did not respond last week to questions as to why department officials are taking a second look at the U.S. Reduction Co. site, other than to say it's a precautionary measure.

'A red flare'

Critics, including local environmental activist Thomas Frank, said the EPA and IDEM should have more seriously considered U.S. Reduction's proximity to residential areas and schools. He wants more properties tested — including nearby Washington Park.

“This is the framework I've been trying to work the EPA into, to address the contaminants where the contaminants migrated, and not just within the (USS Lead Superfund site) legal boundaries,” Frank said. “There's a lead smelter (U.S. Reduction) sitting right across the street. That's just a red flare.”

The city welcomes the expanded testing, East Chicago Mayor Anthony Copeland said in an emailed statement last week.

“It is paramount that we know the locations of as many of the lead- and arsenic-contaminated sites as possible ... This knowledge is vital to the health and safety of our residents, especially when it comes to our children,” Copeland said.

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<http://indianapublicmedia.org/news/epa-east-chicago-mayor-clash-future-contaminated-complex-114861/>

EPA, East Chicago Mayor Clash Over Future Of Contaminated Complex

By ANNIE ROPEIK

Posted February 24, 2017

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